

Individuality, Personality and Selfhood

- As seen in Buddhist perspective

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With a very strong and definite negation of the concept of a Creator who guides the destinies [for the better or worse / development or destruction] of the creation and who offers to the created world refuge or *tāṇa* in times of death and disaster [Study carefully: *attāṇo loko anabhissaro* at M.II. 68], Buddhism correctly shifts the accent over to men and women, to be responsible for a greater part of what comes upon them as success and failure, fortune and misfortune, honour and shame etc. What happens in the world around us like cyclones, earthquakes and floods are part of the activities of nature itself, whether they are favourable to us or otherwise. Thus a personal identity and a consequent personal responsibility and accountability, according to logic of Buddhist thinking, has to be fixed on everyone, man, woman and child. Its absence, leading to moral anarchy, or its being vested elsewhere, in a power to which humans are subordinated, is unthinkable in Buddhism.

This transfer of responsibility and accountability does not and must not lead to a belief in an over-emphasized, gross empirical self. Nor should it, on the other hand, lead to the ingenious creation of a subtle human double or an over-theorized metaphysical self, to which an incredible range of activities like floating through space and undertaking adventures of globe-trotting in the terrestrial and the extra-terrestrial planes is ascribed. One hears in these days of NDE [near-death-experience], of subtle metaphysical selves which leave their physical bodies, roam through several planes, and act using their eyes and ears exactly as they did with their real physical bodies. Buddhism seems to have very little to do with such suppositions.

In Buddhism, functional or phenomenal reality of human existence is readily admitted. To the Buddhist, it is more than a concession. It is a reality. The

conglomeration of the diverse functional processes or the Five Aggregates [*pañcakkhandha*] of which a human is said to be constituted and which is conventionally designated as 'a being' or *satto* [*hoti satto 'ti sammuti* at S.I. 135] is, indeed productive of results. This 'unity of a being' where the aggregates are put together [*evaṃ khandhesu santesu. loc.cit*] responds to the stimuli which it receives from the world outside. It sees, hears, smells, tastes and touches. These inputs through the different sense organs are, under normal circumstances, accurately and independently recorded, with the role of coordinator efficiently played by the mind or *mano* [without any overlapping - see M.I.295] and stored up for future use. Its major operation headquarters is what we call the mind. To the Buddhist, it is this functional reality which makes the individual. It is one's personality. There is no static, clay-footed being besides this, to be dispatched to a world beyond after death, or on the attainment of a so-called divine unification. Human life is declared, as well as seen, to be a conjoint operational process of mind and matter activity [more precisely as *nāma-rūpa* and *viññāṇa* interdependently at work and not as *nāma* and *rūpa* as is generally presented]. It undoubtedly makes life in the world a meaningful reality.

Buddhists see in life, or more precisely in the life process, something more than the reality of this cognitive process.. This very process of living here right now, which is stimulated through sensory reaction, is believed to build up for itself a power which pushes life [or the liver, no matter whichever term one uses] beyond death. Life continuity, from death to birth and from birth to death, again and again, must be emphasized as a matter of primary acceptance and primary concern to the Buddhist. The physical characteristics of the life carrier here, if there were any at all, it is difficult to determine. It belongs to a different dimension. This is where the Buddha corrected the error or misconception of Sati [at M.I. 256 f.] who believed that this self same life carrier consciousness [*viññāṇa*] goes from life to life, without change of identity [... *tad ' ev ' idaṃ viññāṇaṃ sandhāvati saṃsarati anaññan ' ti. Ibid*]. The correction which the Buddha made here is that this consciousness [both at one life level as well as

from one life to another level] is causally generated [*paṭicca-samuppanna*].

Thus far we see that every individual has a personal identity of his or her own. This implies a personal accountability, i.e. a moral and ethical responsibility which is to be reckoned with as having individual and societal relevance. Buddhist teachings hold this in high esteem while it lays greater stress on personal identity for the purpose of transcendental achievements. Hence the Buddhist theory of *anatta* or selflessness or no-soul is no negation of this foundation of moral grounding. Stressing this aspect very firmly, the Buddhist teachings express this in unequivocal terms that ' the Dhamma is to be comprehended by each one for himself or herself ' [*sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā* and *paccattaṃ vedītabbo viññūhi*]. Here both the comprehension and the person who comprehends are real for the purpose of Buddhist soteriology.

Based on this assumption, personal self-culture [*bhāvanā, sikkhā* etc] is introduced in Buddhism without any fear of contradiction of its own theory of selflessness or *anatta*. Spiritual culture in Buddhism moves on a different plane and in a different direction. In Buddhism, it must be clearly understood, it is the culturing of a process of activity, positively rejecting a person behind it. Even though in a highlighted gross form, this is what the Visuddhimagga says at p. 602 when it introduces the Ancients [*Porāṇā*] as saying:

There is no doer of deed
Nor experiencer of its fruition.
Pure conditions alone exist.
This indeed is the correct vision.

Kammasa kārako n ' atthi vipākassa ca vedako
Suddhadhammā pavattanti ev ' etam sammadassanam.

But talking in terms of its total spiritual culture, Buddhism does not recoil from using such powerful phrases like ' the wise discipline themselves ' [*Attānaṃ damayanti paṇḍitā*. Dh. v. 80]. The word 'self ' or 'selves' do not conjure up

before the understanding Buddhist terrifying bogeys of semi-physical journeymen who stand beside us in addition to ourselves. The term '*atta*' as the basis or foundation of Buddhist culture as in *attānaṃ damayanti* [discipline themselves] means no more and no less than the '*samsāra* roaming individuality ' of every single being. Several more useful instances may be cited.

One is one's own guide.
 Who else can be one's guide?
 With a self well disciplined
 One finds for oneself a rare guide.

Attā hi attano nātho ko hi nātho paro siyā
Atanā ' va sudantena nāthaṃ labhati dullabhaṃ Dhp. v. 160

If one knows that one loves oneself,
 One should take good care of that self.
 During any one of the three watches of the night
 A wise man should wakefully scrutinize himself.

Attānaṃ ce piyaṃ jaññā rakkheyya naṃ surakkhitaṃ
Tiṇṇaṃ aññataraṃ yāmaṃ paṭijaggeyya paṇḍito. Dhp. v. 157

As one more example in this series we would reproduce here the oft-quoted [we would definitely say oft-misquoted] reference to ' the search for the self ' [*attānaṃ gaveseyyātha*. Vin. I. p. 23]. As a warning against recurring misinterpretations which we discover from time to time, we would like to make some observations here. As far back as 1951, Miss I.B.Horner translates this statement *Taṃ kiṃ maññatha vo kumārā katamaṃ nu kho tuṃhākaṃ vamaṃ yaṃ vā tumhe itthiṃ gaveseyyātha yaṃ vā attānaṃ gaveseyyāthā ' ti* [at Vin.I.p. 23 referred to above] as " What do you think of this, young men? Which is better for you, that you should seek for a woman or that **you should seek for the self?**"

[Book of the Discipline Part 4. p.32. Emphasis is mine].

In her enthusiasm and her wishful thinking, we are afraid, she is stretching a point too far when she seeks the support of ' compound *attadīpā* of *D.* II. 100 and Sn. 501.' [*dīpa* here certainly does not mean a lamp. It means an island, a source of security or refuge: *Atta-dīpā ' ti mahāsamuddagataṃ dīpaṃ viya attānaṃ dīpaṃ patiṭṭhaṃ katvā viharatha.* DA. II. 548]. The most we could concede here is that the Buddha was alerting the young men who were searching for a runaway woman about the **need for self awareness**. He would have just told them: " Look after yourselves, boys. Forget about the woman." In all these cases, here as well as in the above, the word *atta* [= self] is used as a reflexive pronoun, without any implications of metaphysical, religious or spiritual implications. It is categorically indicated in Buddhist texts that a self or *atta* with any such implications is never to be had in Buddhist thinking.

The most emphatic rejection of such an assumption occurs in the Parable of the Snake [Alagaddupama Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya. M.I. 138]. The grossly incorrect translation of the relevant Pali passage by Miss. I.B. Horner [Middle Length Sayings I. p.177] has blazed a trail of vociferous argument in favour of a Self that exists. Here is the Pali: *Attani ca bhikkhave attaniye ca **saccato thetato anupalabbhamāne** ...* And here is its translation by Miss. Horner: But if Self, monks, and what belongs to Self, **although actually existing, are incomprehensible**... Here the bold type Pali is translated in the bold type English. We do not accept the English as a correct translation. We offer ' is well and truly not to be found '.

What the Sutta does in fact is to chastise severely the assumption that the world and self are identical [*so loko so attā*] and that a permanent, unchanging self persists after death. This wrong assumption, the Sutta calls ' absolute complete folly '. What Miss. Horner does is a completely unjustifiable reversal of the Buddhist philosophic stand.

Accepting the reality of a causally originated and continuously conditioned

[*paṭiccasamuppanna*] selfhood or *attā* which holds itself responsible for its own continuance in better or worse form [as *sugati* or *duggati*], Buddhists have to, even in a limited way, look for its genesis. For the free use of the word *attā* in this sense as a reflexive pronoun, see the following.

Attanā ' va kataṃ papaṃ attanā saṃkilissati

Attanā akataṃ pāpaṃ attanā ' va visujjhati

Suddhī asuddhi paccattaṃ nāñño aññaṃ visodhaye. Dhp. v. 165

Evil deeds done **by oneself** brings about **one's own** contamination

Evil undone **by oneself** brings about **one's own** purification.

Purity and contamination are **one's own** creation.

None other brings about **one's own** purification.

The life process of humans [not one life] which is comprehensively contained within the word *samsāra* is accepted to be infinitely long [*Anamatagg 'āyaṃ bhikkhave saṃsāro* . S.II. 178]. Its beginning is shrouded in the distant past and for that reason is not readily visible [*pubbā koṭi na paññāyati*. Ibid.]. *Saṃsāra* is best viewed as a vast network of distinct individual processes of life continuity. Laying hands on this process at any point of its activity, Buddhist texts speak of two unmistakable qualities or features closely associated with it. The victims caught therein are blinded or misled by their inability to view things correctly due to their ignorance or lack of knowledge [*avijjā-nīvaraṇānaṃ* Ibid.]. They are also caught up in the snares of craving [*taṇhā-saṃyojanānaṃ* Ibid.]. Individual life processes which are propelled by these keep rolling on a linear rhythm, moving up or down after death to various higher or lower grades of existence, the exits to which from here being determined by the karmic content of one's life style.

It is this least traceable life-generating and life-propelling dynamism which is traceable to the Buddhist concept of *saṅkhāra* which might constitute the core of personality or selfhood in Buddhism. When the mind is no more involved with *saṅkhāra* or *saṅkhāra* generation [*visaṅkhāra-gataṃ cittaṃ*] it reaches the realm

of Nirvana, i.e. the termination of craving [*taṇhānam khayam ajjhagā*]. The mind disengaged of these activities appears to have no survival. With this the whole process of *saṃsāric* continuance appears to come to an end. And that would be the real and total end of INDIVIDUALITY, PERSONALITY and SELFHOOD.